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PW Daily Book of the Day – It's Hard to Make a Difference...

by Sharon Glassman

Six years ago a colleague of Marilyn Paul broke down and told her the truth: Paul's last-minute arrivals at meetings, reams of confused papers and endless rescheduling had put the kibosh on their working relationship.

Stunned, Paul, a highly successful if frenzied management consultant, turned to popular books on organizing. The only problem? Tips like "Use a Planner" assumed she could find her planner.

"There are people who can't even use the basics," she told PW Daily on a recent afternoon, swinging her shoeless feet comfortably over the arm of a Penguin Putnam conference room chair. "That's my audience."

Paul's book, *It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys* (Putnam Compass, \$14), is designed for the "chronically disorganized," people whose lives are negatively affected by their inability to achieve oft-stated goals, keep appointments or find things in a reasonable amount of time.

Her steps to organization are laid out as a seven-step "path," bringing to mind classic guides to serenity, such as *Zen Mind*, *Beginner's Mind* and *The Road Less Traveled*. This is no accident. Unlike authors who prescribe order for order's sake, Paul sees organizing one's office and home as "a genuine possibility for true personal growth."

Readers looking for a physical quick-fix may be frustrated by Paul's psychological and spiritual focus on "visioning" a purpose for one's clearer life. At the same time, a 300-page book targeted to people who can't focus is an ironic proposition--at least initially.

But the book's reliance on personal stories--Paul's, most of all, for purposes of humility--make it a truly empathic and useful tool for "right-brain" people whose disorder borders on the pathological. As she explained her approach in person, her warmth and good humor make her a living ambassador of the joys of the ordered life. The same appears to be true of the workshops she has conducted to support the book's launch.

A few e-mails to her New York friends, she says, drew a crowd of 150 externally organized but internally frantic professionals to the Princeton Club recently in search of solace and help.

In addition to outward signs of distress--from unpaid bills to desks in need of archeological digs--chronically disorganized people may suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder or behavioral problems related to spending and hoarding or both. Like the population at large, some people also cling to the idea that clutter is a breeding



31 Barberry Road Lexington, MA 02421

Phone: (781)861-9772 Fax: (781)863-6114

Email: mpaul@bridgewaypartners.com

ground for creativity, which she dismisses as one of disorganization's biggest myths: "Your creativity needs order and discipline," she tells her audiences.

But if you think she's trying to make you into a "neatnick," don't worry. Organization--this is Big Myth #2--doesn't have to be neat. The mark of a good system of organization, in fact, is not how it looks, as much as how it makes you feel. "One of the clearest signs of disorganization is the amount of fear, anxiety and frenzy you're feeling," Paul said. "The opposite of disorder is peace and calm."

Among the simple tips Paul suggests are

- Looking at how little time large tasks, such as putting away laundry and clean dishes, really takes.
- Working backwards from a fixed appointment before scheduling "small" tasks that might delay arriving late to an appointment.
- Pricing out an "affordable" luxury so that it can be bought only if impulse purchases are avoided.

Asked how much consumer culture contributes to our disorder, Paul said she believed advertising's natural outgrowth, consumption, is part of many people's problem. "The more stuff you've got, the more skillful you have to be in managing it," she said. "In our world, it's easy to accumulate, but it's hard to let things go."

Paul noted that "clot" is the root of the word "clutter. A life without clutter moves more smoothly. And this, interestingly enough, is where the next challenge lies. Flowing like a river between well-ordered appointments, the organized person is free to experience the world-at-large, and most of all, herself. At this point, the benefits of a being at peace with oneself cannot be underestimated.

"When faced with those quiet moments with nothing to do," Paul said, smiling, as our interview ended, on the half-hour, precisely. "What do we do?" -- Sharon Glassman